DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 211 971 CS 206 683

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TITLE Interpreting Diagnostic Essays: Basic Writer or Composition Student?
PUB DATE Mar 81
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (32nd, Dallas, TX, March 26-28, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Course Content; Diagnostic Tests; Essay Tests; Higher Education; *Remedial Instruction; *Student Needs; *Student Placement; Testing Problems; *Test Interpretation; *Writing Evaluation; *Writing Instruction; Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

In most colleges and universities, the task of assigning students to basic or remedial writing courses is handled the same way--students are tested during a summer orientation program by a combination objective and essay examination or during the first few days of the term by a composition instructor. Whereas the intentions of the testing are good, the way these tests are interpreted sometimes results in placing students who do not have basic writing problems in basic writing classes. Perhaps the clearest way to identify basic writing students and their errors is to begin by examining the kinds of writing problems and skills that introductory composition teachers should accept as theirs to confront, such as compositional weaknesses, syntax and diction problems, or spelling errors. The students who can be helped by the basic writing class are those who cannot conform to the grammatical and mechanical conventions of standard English, who do not recognize sentence boundaries, or whose vocabulary is so limited and whose vocabulary skills are so weak that they cannot communicate an idea. Educators responsible for writing programs should both examine the differences in ability between the strongest and the weakest beginning writing students at their own institutions and use these differences to determine the criteria that indicate what is taught in a basic writing course and what is taught in composition classes. (HOD)

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Interpreting Diagnostic Essays: Basic Writer or Composition Student?

Irwin Weiser

In most colleges and universities, the task of assigning students to basic writing or remedial writing courses is handled in the same way. Incoming freshmen are either tested during a summer orientation program where they are given a combination objective and essay examination, or they are sent to the basic writing class during the first week or two of the semester by a composition instructor who has evaluated their potential for success on the basis of an in-class essay. The intention of these two methods is to identify students who are likely, because of basic deficiencies in their writing skills, to fail introductory composition courses, and to place them in classes with similar students so they will have the opportunity to develop the skills they lack. Both the means and the intention of this testing are good. The means of testing, either during summer orientation or the first few days of the term, certainly not ideal given what research in the evaluation of writing tells us about examining multiple samples of a student's writing, are

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nevertheless good because placement nearly always occurs under constraints of time and money and because tests which include a writing sample are obviously superior to placement according to ACT or SAT scores which do not currently contain writing. The intentions of the testing, to avoid placing students in situations where they are likely to meet failure because they are unprepared, are especially good given the open-admissions or nearly open-admissions policies of most publically-funded and many privately-funded colleges and universities. But as anyone who has taught basic writing courses will attest, the way these tests are interpreted sometimes results in placing students who do not have basic writing problems in basic writing classes. And this makes teaching basic writing more difficult than it by nature is.

The problem arises because often the people who evaluate the diagnostic tests and essays have different ideas about which writing flaws should identify the basic writer and which flaws should be treated in a writing lab tutorial, office-hour conference, or composition class. In most universities, introductory composition is taught by graduate assistants who are not yet familiar with the range of writing problems they will encounter, or by faculty members who often are not writing specialists and whose scholarly interests and experiences do not include the discrimination of different kinds of writing errors and weaknesses. I do not intend to criticize these instructors, who often are effective and dedicated writing teachers, or to argue that composition

should only be taught by composition specialists, a condition which would lead to professional insularity at best and departmental divisiveness at worst. What I prefer to do is distinguish the kinds of writing errors which should identify a student who needs remedial work from those which do not come under the province of the basic writing class.

Perhaps the clearest way to identify basic writing students and their errors is to begin by examining the kinds of writing problems and skills which introductory composition teachers should accept as theirs to confront. Most obvious of these should be compositional skills, including thesis development and support, content development, and essay structure. Students whose writing is weak primarily because they do not write clear thesis statements, or do not write effective introductions or conclusions are precisely the students for whom introductory composition courses are designed. The texts for such courses invariably discuss these issues and present them as material which the student needs to learn and master as the central goal of the course. These are a part of "composing," the kinds of things students must know to enable them to develop, organize, and present their ideas to an audience effectively. Paragraphing skills also fall into this category insofar as the paragraph is seen as an organizational unit, either part of a larger discourse or a complete rhetorical unit in itself.

Syntactic errors such as misplaced or dangling modifiers and syntactic weaknesses such as sentences which are similar

in structure or unvaried in length make up a second category of writing problems which should usually be treated by the composition teacher or tutor. Students who produce syntactically confusing sentences may not communicate clearly or effectively, but neither are they necessarily candidates for the basic writing class, for reasons I will soon explain. The same is true for students who occasionally produce a fragment, comma splice, or run-on sentence which appears to result more from an unfamiliarity with punctuation rules than from an inability to determine sentence boundaries.

While our students often model their diction as well as their syntax after the jargon-filled press releases, academic and corporate documents, and advertisements they are exposed to, their inflated, ambiguous diction and convoluted syntax often indicate flawed models, limited writing experience, and efforts to experiment with prose which they feel is sophisticated rather than essential skills problems. Much can be done in the composition class to make students aware of different levels of formality of language and to help them learn to recognize colloquialisms and slang, cliches and jargon, and to use words which are suitable for their particular rhetorical situation. These are things which, by presenting better models and by sensitive editing, the composition teacher can and should address.

The final kind of writing problem which should not, by itself, earmark a student for basic writing is spelling. Admittedly, many basic writers cannot spell, but to send a

student whose writing is otherwise mechanically and grammatically sound to a basic writing class because he or she cannot spell will not help that student become a more qualified introductory composition student. Most of us do not spend much time in basic writing classes trying to teach spelling. Because spelling problems are so individual, most students need the kind of help which can best be provided by a writing lab tutor armed with analytical skills, spelling rules and exercises . . . and time. And we need to recognize that spelling has little to do with students' compositional abilities, less to do with their intelligence, and a great deal to do with a writer's willingness to admit to a weakness and make a conscious, individual effort to confront it. Certainly spelling errors influence readers' judgments of prose, and may even, if frequent and annoying enough, result in a student's failure, but even the poorest spelling does not automatically mean that a student has basic writing problems.

If errors of logic, thesis development, organization, syntax, diction, or spelling do not identify the basic writer, what does? Am I trying to lighten the basic writing teacher's burden by saying to composition teachers "Keep your poor writers; I have problems of my own"? No, I am not suggesting that introductory composition teachers should consider every writing problem which appears on diagnostic essays their responsibility. Although I would argue that sending students who have the kinds of writing problems I

have mentioned to basic writing classes does sometimes amount to a composition instructor's refusal to accept students whose writing is better than "basic," I can also outline four kinds of writing problems which should result in a student being assigned to basic or remedial writing courses.

The inability to write prose which conforms to conventions of Standard English is the first kind of writing problem which identifies students who should take basic writing courses. Either because the dialect which the student speaks varies significantly from Standard English or because the student's writing experience is limited, he or she may not have the ability to write prose which is grammatically or mechanically Standard. The specific writing errors which identify this deficiency include inflectional errors such as a failure to use verb endings which indicate tense or number. The similar confusion of number in noun use, pronoun-antecedent agreement errors, and the ability to use or recognize possessive case also indicate basic writing problems. Subject-verb agreement, which may appear as an inflectional error, but which often indicates a misunderstanding of the concept of number, is another common problem of basic writing students, and not of students who are competent enough in Standard English to be in composition classes. Finally, the inability to grasp the concept of parts of speech, to recognize that modifiers, nouns, and verbs function differently, may be used to identify students who need a course which teaches the conventions of Standard

English.

The second kind of writing problem which seems typical of basic writing students concerns their ability to identify sentence boundaries. Sentence boundary problems differ from the kinds of syntactic errors which composition students may be expected to produce. While composition students may not consistently write sentences in which the relationship between phrasal and clausal modifiers and the clauses they modify is clear, or may not produce syntactically mature sentences, they usually are capable of producing grammatically complete and discrete sentences. The basic writing student, however, often is not sure how to indicate in writing that one idea is ending and another is beginning. These students produce fragments, run-ons, and comma splices frequently when they write, treat subordinate clauses as sentences, and use adverbial phrases as if they were complete units of meaning. They do not recognize that words like "whereas" indicate a relationship between two ideas and thus introduce a clause which must be preceded or followed by another clause. And these problems are quite different from the occasional fragment, run-on, or comma splice referred to earlier, which composition students produce because they have not mastered a particular punctuation rule.

Basic writing students often have vocabulary problems which prevent them from succeeding in composition courses. Just as the sentence boundary errors described in the previous paragraph differ from the syntactic problems of

composition students, so do vocabulary problems of basic writers differ from the diction problems which most composition students have. While both basic writing and more advanced composition students may use inflated, overly-formal language, abstract nouns, and ambiguous modifiers, basic writers' vocabulary problems are more diverse and complicated. Their prose is often bare and repetitious, their simple, short sentences reflecting an inability to find the words which enable them to flesh out and develop ideas, their thoughts couched in the same common words over and over again. As Mina Shaughnessy points out, basic writers rely heavily on the pronoun _it_, the word _there_ used as a subject for _is_ or _are_, and ambiguous nouns like _thing_, _manner_, and _aspect_. The verbs, adjectives, and adverbs the basic writer chooses are similarly common, simple, and general--verbs like _have_, _be_, _do_, _use_, _put_; adjectives like _certain_, _important_, _full_, and _many_; and adverbs like _very_ and _really_.[1]

Further, the vocabulary of basic writing students is less formal, more dependent upon slang, colloquialisms, and dialect features than that of introductory composition students, who err more often on the side of over-formality. When basic writers do attempt to use words which are more specific and appropriate for college students, they often misuse the words, substituting words which sound like the word they want but mean something else, or which are derived from the same or a similar root word, but which are the incorrect part of speech or are used in different contexts.

They may also choose words which are similar in denotation to the words they seek but which have different connotations. In some cases, students invent words, like the word "tensity," which one of my students used to suggest that he became tense. Here, the words tense, tension, and intensity have blended in the student's mind, and the result is a word filled with connotations, but lacking denotation.

The final kind of writing problem which identifies the basic writing student is not a single problem at all, but rather a combination of writing deficiencies which singly might be dealt with in a composition class or in a writing lab by a tutor but which together amount to a communication barrier which indicates nearly certain failure in introductory composition. Students who are grossly deficient in mechanical skills like punctuation; syntactic skills like modification, coordination, and subordination; diction and vocabulary skills; and conceptual skills such as elementary thesis development and organization do not belong in composition courses, where they are likely to fail. Although these students may have control of sentence boundaries and Standard English, they should be placed in basic writing classes and encouraged to seek additional assistance from writing lab tutors so that they can receive as much individualized instruction and as much writing practice as possible. These severely deficient students, if they are motivated (and often they are not) and if they are given time, may begin to improve their writing skills. Often,

however, these are students who will not measurably improve after a semester or more of remedial work. They do not learn to write well enough to receive credit for basic writing and to enter introductory composition. Though our efforts to help these students may seem futile and frustrating, they are, of necessity, the province of the basic writing class.

While I began this essay by stating that my intention was to identify the basic writing student, in order to do this it has been necessary to identify as well those writing problems and writing students who are not candidates for remedial work. Writing teachers whose responsibility it is to recommend that students take basic writing classes must recognize that such classes are designed to address only some of the writing problems of our students, that compositional weaknesses, syntax and diction problems, and poor spelling may identify poor writers, even writers who may fail composition classes, but not basic writers. It is the student who can not conform to the grammatical and mechanical conventions of Standard English, who does not recognize sentence boundaries, or whose vocabulary is so limited and whose vocabulary skills are so weak that he cannot communicate an idea whom the basic writing class can help. Placing students with "composition class" writing problems in basic writing is a serious error. Teachers in the basic writing class find their situation one of choice--do they teach the most or least competent in their class? If they choose to do the former, the result is frequently a slightly

less sophisticated version of introductory composition, and the students who need basic skills work do not receive it. If they choose to do the latter, the better students in the class are, in effect, spending a semester doing work which is largely unnecessary. In either case, students and teachers become frustrated, and the goals of the basic writing class are not accomplished. Thus it is imperative that writing teachers learn to distinguish between the errors our students make in order to identify more precisely those students who are ready to take a composition class and those who need the specialized help which the basic writing class offers.

At the risk of undercutting what I have said, I will conclude with a qualification: while the distinctions I have made in this essay can certainly help instructors identify very weak writers, it is possible that such writers do not exist in large numbers at some schools. A school's admission policies, its reputation, and its major educational goals are some of the factors which can influence how broad the range of students' writing abilities and experiences may be. Those responsible for writing programs should examine the differences in ability between the weakest and strongest beginning writing students at their own institutions and use these differences to determine the criteria which indicate what is taught in a basic writing course and what is taught in composition classes. Basic writing at one institution may focus upon grammar and mechanics while at another basic writers may be competent in those areas but may not be able

to compete with the majority of their peers because of problems with, for example, sentence structure or the clear development of an idea. Basic writing courses can not exist in a vacuum; their goals and content ultimately should be based upon the needs of the students who populate them, with an eye upon the expectations instructors in subsequent courses will have.

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Notes

[1]Mina P. Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 199-202.